



AAC Publications

First Ascents in Southern Zaskar Range

India, Himachal Pradesh

Sumdo lies on the banks of the Spiti River, has a large military base, and is an important strategic point between the districts of Lahaul and Spiti and Kinnaur. To its east lie many unclimbed peaks of the Southern Zaskar Range, north and south of the highest mountain in Himachal Pradesh, Reo Purgyil (6,816m). The mountains east and south of Sumdo and close to the border with Tibet are little visited by mountaineers because of underdeveloped tourism facilities and travel restrictions.

Four self-sustained expeditions by the Sumdo-based Snow Saboteurs specialized military team carried out extensive exploration in part of this area between August 2020 and June 2021.

The first sortie took place August 16–28, 2020, when I led a 17-member team into the area east of Sumdo to try peaks in the Jogse Massif. Jogse (6,362m, 32°01'30"N, 78°43'27"E) is a largely rocky peak. From the summit, a ridge runs in an arc to Jogse South (6,335m), then southeast to Peak 6,401m, and finally to a spur that shoots westward to a 6,220m summit popularly known as Mt. Ibex and climbed many times. Starting on the 27th from a camp at 5,283m, a 10-person team climbed the dry and rocky northwest slope of Jogse to make the first ascent. The team then moved north easily to make the first ascent of Peak 5,873m (32°2'42.29"N, 78°42'58.28"E).

A second exploratory expedition took place September 21–October 15, 2020, this time to the probably untouched Rakti Khad Glacier, which lies east of Pooh on the Spiti Highway, well south of Sumdo. Our goals were unclimbed peaks 5,985m (31°44'5.38"N, 78°43'50.60"E) and, just to the north, Peak 5,974m, both lying on the border with Tibet and overlooking the latter's Shipki Valley.

From Camp 3 at 5,078m, our eight-member team climbed the rocky southwest spur of Peak 5,974m to make its first ascent. Our subsequent attempt on Peak 5,985m, by the northwest-facing upper Rakti Khad Glacier, was unsuccessful due to formidable crevasses and ice walls. We were eventually forced to climb out left from the glacier to reach a scree-covered col on the north-northwest ridge, about 1km from the summit. We tried to continue up the ridge but retreated from an altitude of around 5,900m.

From January 28 to February 10, 2021, we conducted our first winter expedition from Sumdo to explore the Chango Heights. Located close to and east of Chango village (31°58'34.39"N, 78°35'29.47"E) on the Spiti River Highway, Chango Heights comprise three prominent peaks north of the Chango Valley: 5,866m, 6,000m, and 6,215m (all 12 to 13km northwest of Reo Purgyil).

Making one high camp at around 4,200m, our 15-member team climbed the west ridge of Peak 5,866m (31°59'10.46"N, 78°40'24.90"E) over boulders and scree on February 7. We gained the summit after a strenuous 11-hour climb in strong winds. The top was a conical feature with a thick covering of snow. However, this was as far as we went: The continuation ridge east toward Peak 6,000m was heavily corniced, with steep rocky cliffs to either side. [Peak 5,866m had been climbed before, though this was certainly the first winter ascent. The two 6,000m peaks of the Chango Heights are unclimbed].

Our most challenging expedition took place from May 10–June 9, 2021. Our goal was to climb six peaks southeast of Sumdo: Peak 6,401m (32°00'26"N, 78°43'58"E), Jogse South (6,335m,

32°0'57.62"N, 78°43'46.45"E), Mt. Ibex (6,220m, 32°1'1.41"N, 78°41'57.34"E), Peak 6,164m (32°1'9.89"N, 78°41'57.03"E), Peak 6,098m (32°1'22.05"N, 78°41'59.46"E), and Peak 5,873m (the last already climbed on our August 2020 expedition). These peaks form an arc around the previously unvisited Newlathang Glacier. The expedition numbered 75 members.

On May 31, a total of 60 people in three groups made the first ascent of the northwest face of Mt. Ibex. Peaks 6,164m and 6,098m are pimples on the north ridge of Ibex overlooking the Newlathang Valley to the east and were climbed easily, as was Peak 5,873m, via the frozen, snow-covered western slope. Heavy snowfall then added to the challenge of climbing Peak 6,401m and Jogse South. The ascent of the Newlathang Glacier was a crevasse-laden 10km trek, with avalanche-prone slopes to both sides, and a narrow section of rockfall potential from the east of Mt. Ibex. A final camp was placed to the south of Jogse at 5,963m.

On June 6 our 12-person team climbed the northwest flank of Peak 6,401m to reach Newlathang Col, a broad icy saddle, then traversed the upper east face, finally sneaking onto the south ridge to reach the summit. The team returned to Newlathang Col and from there crossed to the southeast ridge of Jogse South, which they followed to its summit.

The Snow Saboteur expeditions have hopefully showed the mountaineering potential of the Southern Zaskar, where there are still unclimbed summits such as Peaks 6,608m, 6,500m, and 6,230m. At present, the border area remains tightly restricted.

— Lt. Col. Jay Prakash, India

Images



Approaching the summit of Mt. Ibex (6,220m), east of Sumdo.



Leo Purguil (6,791m, left) and Reo Purguil (6,816m) from Jogse to the north.



Near the summit of Mt. Ibex (6,220m).

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